



**ISSU**  
IRISH SECOND-LEVEL  
STUDENTS' UNION

# Power in Pronouns:

A student's guide to all things

Pronouns Acceptance and belonging



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# Introduction

The Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) is the national representative body for school students in the Republic of Ireland. We were founded in 2008. Our national representatives are elected every year at ISSU's Annual Assembly. The ISSU aims to provide support, training and assistance to member school's student councils. Through this support, the ISSU aims to foster a stronger student voice at all levels of the education system. School students should be involved in all matters that directly affect them, and this means having a seat at the decision-making table and being respected as an equal stakeholder. The ISSU represents, uplifts and defends the student voice of second-level student members and campaigns for a better quality of education and access.

The ISSU is run for students, by students.

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# What are pronouns?

## Definition of pronouns

The dictionary definition of a pronoun is 'a word that can function as a noun or noun phrase. Pronouns refer to either a noun that has already been mentioned or to a noun that does not need to be named specifically', but what are pronouns in layman terms? **Pronouns are the words we often use to refer to the person we are talking about when not using their name. Often, they have gendered implications when we use them.**

"Pronouns are a vital part of how we speak to and about each other, and how we express ourselves to the world. Changing my pronouns was an important way for me to come to understand myself more fully, and to express a more authentic sense of myself to others too. I'm so glad that I did, but years later it can still be intense to be the only person introducing or displaying my pronouns. Everyone has pronouns and it's great to see more people introducing their pronouns and normalising the conversation! Putting your pronouns in your social media bio, or including your pronouns when introducing yourself are both great ways of not only showing allyship with the trans community but changing how we think about gender and privilege."

Daire Dempsey, they/them, Education Officer, Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI).

## A brief History on gender-neutral pronouns

For some people pronouns are seen as a 21st century, new thing, but they aren't! Pronouns have been around since the beginning of the English language and have evolved alongside the language itself.

The usage of pronouns today look vastly different than it did at the time of its creation. In the 1700s old English started to stop the usage of gendered pronouns to refer to inanimate objects, (something that is still seen in languages such as French and German) It vanished altogether soon after that, it was believed that this was done to make the language easier to learn. Pronouns were now reserved to talk about people.

The singular 'they' was used as a gender-neutral pronoun from the 14th century up until the 1700s, where it was debated whether that 'he' should be used as the gender-neutral pronoun and 'they' should only be used when referring to multiple people. In the 1800s people were on the hunt for gender-neutral pronouns. The search for these pronouns were big with Feminists trying to eliminate social bias.

# What are pronouns?

The earliest recorded use of gender-neutral pronouns was in the 14th century in a French poem called 'William the werewolf'. Seeing this early example it could be possible that people were using 'they' as a singular pronoun in conversations before words were ever written on paper.

The use of the singular they has been growing in popularity again from the 1970s along with movements and advocating for gender inclusive language.

"As a non-binary person, it's really important to me that language accommodates how I feel about my gender identity. Using they/them/theirs pronouns is a way to start to describe this feeling and how beautiful and complex it is. While words might not be able to describe every single aspect of someone's gender identity, using the correct pronouns shows respect for ourselves and for each other. By doing this, we show each other that we care, that we see our different and individual relationships with gender, and that we see how beautiful and complex they are. Like Audre Lorde said, 'we must allow each other our differences!' "

Diana Bamimeke, Art writer & independent curator (they/them)

## Transgender Day of Visibility

The International Day of Trans Visibility is celebrated each year in Ireland and abroad on March 31st. This day is dedicated to acknowledging the achievements and contributions of the Trans and Non Binary community, as well as raising awareness of the perpetual struggles and discrimination which Transgender and Non Binary people live through every day.

The celebration is especially important because it gives Transgender and Non-Binary people an opportunity to be accurately represented and seen within society. The day aims to tear down stereotypes and misconceptions around the community so everyone can be their true selves and feel understood.

While TV and media have somewhat improved in terms of trans representation, there is still a long way to go. It will take years to unravel the misinformation spread by the media up until recently, which taught the public how to treat trans people and has isolated the community. More visibility and awareness means that over time society will become more understanding and accommodating of Trans Rights and needs.

The International Day of Transgender Visibility was created by Rachel Crandall, a Trans advocate, in 2010. She disliked how trans people were only discussed in

# What are pronouns?

relation to hate crimes and violence. She wanted to celebrate the lives of trans people, not just mourn the ones that are lost.

At the time, the only event dedicated to Trans people was the Trans day of Remembrance, which was often a very solemn time for many. So she decided to make a Facebook post encouraging people to organise festivities in their hometowns and began messaging accounts from all over the world.

To her surprise this worked, and soon the 31st March became known as the International Day of Transgender Visibility.

Now, every year, people from all over the world show their support for the community with gatherings and celebrations, and Skyscrapers in major cities can be seen lighting up the night with the trans colours.

Thanks to Crandall, trans and non binary people all across the world feel represented and seen, creating a more understanding society for all.

***“It's vital that Transgender and nonbinary students in particular have role models who represent their struggles and validate their feelings. No young person should feel misunderstood and discriminated against because of their identity. Schools should be a safe place for students to express themselves, and the International day of Trans Visibility is one way that everyone can show their support for each other. It creates a sense of community for those who feel alone and gives an opportunity for people to share their experiences, showing students that it's OK to be yourself.”***

***Charlotte Gillian he/they TY Student and ISSU Equality Team Rep***

## Different Types of Pronouns

There are loads! Everybody has pronouns that they like to be called by, not just trans and non-binary people. Pronouns are very different and they are unique to the person who uses them, that's why they are called our personal pronouns.

Some people may use more than one pronoun to talk about themselves. This is commonly written as he/they, they/she, she/they, they/he, he/she/they or any combination of two or more pronouns.

# Different Types of Pronouns

Some people may also just write “all” beside their names when referring to pronouns. This means that they are comfortable with you using all pronouns when referring to them.

If this is the case, you should alternate between the pronouns when you are talking about the person, unless they give you more specific instructions.

## The difference between gender identity, gender expression and biological sex

Gender identity, gender expression and biological sex are terms that are often thrown about when talking about Pronouns, but what do they actually mean and what is the difference between them?

Gender Identity is our own understanding of our gender, based on how we understand and see gender in our culture and community. Examples of gender identity are male, female, nonbinary, agender, transgender, etc.

Gender expression is how we express ourselves to the outside world, through mediums such as clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms and more. Often people group gender identity and gender expression together and think they are the same thing but they are not.

Biological sex is a medical term that is based on primary and secondary sex characteristics, hormones and chromosomes. Often this is assigned at birth. Examples of biological sex are male, female and intersex.

Sex - this refers to someone’s biological status (normally based on external anatomy)

Intersex - when someone is born with sex characteristics that differ from what is typically seen as female or male traits, they are known as intersex. For example, in some cases, a person’s body has both male and female characteristics. Another instance is where a person’s chromosomal make-up is neither completely male nor female. These characteristics might be present at birth or become more apparent during or after puberty.

When someone identifies themselves to you, you refer to them in that way as a sign of respect and acknowledgment. To do anything else is a not-so-subtle rejection of their identity.

# Why Using the Right Pronouns Matter

It communicates to these people that they aren't welcome or accepted. Using someone's correct pronouns is a way of affirming one's identity in everyday interaction. Think about the number of times we use pronouns in an everyday conversation, we can show respect or disrespect that many times.

Using a person's correct pronouns is an important step to making your school a more inclusive environment.

***"The first time someone used my correct pronouns I cried. I felt so validated. Being trans is not easy but having people respect something as simple as pronouns makes it a whole lot easier. Using the correct pronouns raises self esteem, lessens depression and promotes inclusion. Which are all reasons why there is power through the use of pronouns."*** - Sarah J Murray (they/them) Galway Pride activist

## Using Your Pronouns

How to tell and display your pronouns if you change them. It can be easiest to just say what your preferred pronouns are as part of your name. For example I'm Martha (she/her).

But of course it is completely optional and you should feel free to separate your name from your pronouns. For example I'm Martha and I use she/her pronouns. If you don't feel comfortable telling other people what your pronouns are, that is completely fine. If you'd still like people to know what pronouns you use you could always pick up a pronouns pin from your local store.

You don't have to stick to one set of pronouns. For example often people might use she/they or he/all or they/he pronouns. If you feel comfortable using more than one set of pronouns you should.

It's important to remember that you can **always** change pronouns if you choose to, pronouns are a unique part of your identity and if you no longer identify with a particular set of pronouns you can change them.

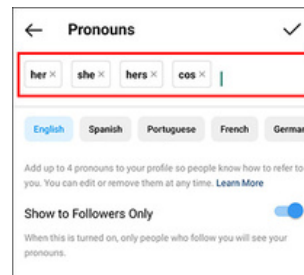
## Pronouns online

Most social media platforms are embracing the need for inclusivity and platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook and LinkedIn have now added profile features that allow their users to share their pronouns. You can also add your pronouns if you're in an online meeting/call on platforms such as teams or zoom by



# Pronouns online

just changing your name and adding your pronouns beside it.



***“You should consider sharing your pronouns on social media, and who knows, you might help someone finally feel like they can share their own.” - Bel Nabulele she/they ISSU Equality Officer 2023/2024***

## Respecting Other People's pronouns

What's the best way to ask for somebody else's pronouns?

*When should I ask for people's pronouns? What if they look at me weirdly?*  
First and foremost, **talking about pronouns will more than likely be a bit awkward and that is okay.** You should try and ask somebody for their preferred pronouns when you first meet them.

Never be afraid to ask someone for their pronouns. If they choose not to tell you that is their choice but that doesn't mean that you can or can't choose to share yours. It is important to use whatever pronouns a person identifies with.

If you mess up with someone's pronouns and someone corrects you, correct yourself, thank them and move on.

***“Language is powerful and words matter. When someone tells you their pronouns, they are sharing with you part of who they are. Using someone's pronouns is an important way of affirming a person's identity. Now only does it recognise them for who they are and show respect, but it helps them feel safe and accepted. It is allyship in action.***

***If you are unsure of a person's pronouns, it's OK to ask them and share what your pronouns are in return. And if you mistakenly use the wrong pronouns for someone, simply apologise, correct yourself and commit to be more mindful of how you refer to people in the future. By using your own pronouns in your email signature, on social platforms, and anywhere else you see an opportunity, you are sending a clear message to you to understand the importance of pronouns and that you are an ally.”***

Moninne Griffith (she/her), LGBTQ Rights Activist and CEO of Belong To

# The Different Ways to Ask for Someone's Pronouns

Give your own pronouns first - "Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my pronouns are \_\_/\_\_\_, What are your name and pronouns?"

What pronouns do you use?

How to ask for someone's pronouns if you forget what pronouns they use:

- Can you remind me of your pronouns?
- Can you remind me what pronouns you use?
- Let's do a pronouns refresher. My pronouns are \_\_/\_\_\_

Remember practice makes perfect, practice alone, with others in conversations and online (there are great websites to practise with)

\*Always remember to use a person's preferred pronouns even when they aren't around\*

## How to Embrace Pronouns in your Everyday Life

- Always ask for people's pronouns, never assume
- Add your pronouns into your email signature + Social media Bios
- Wear pronoun pins, (you can get a whole bunch as well as other Pride merch from Dublin pride hub in Dublin City)
- Create a safe inclusive space (when it comes to pronouns reflect the language that a person uses when referring to themselves)
- Normalise and have regular conversations about gender identity
- Try to use everyone's correct pronouns whether they're present or not
- Try to avoid gender stereotyping
- Don't question people about their pronouns (if you have questions google is a great researcher)
- Be aware of your language, use more gender inclusive terms when referring to a group of people
- Practise Active Listening: Pay attention to the pronouns used by others in conversations and respect their choice without assumptions or judgments
- Celebrate people's differences with Pride!

# Useful Resources

How to practise using peoples' pronouns : [www.practicewithpronouns.com](http://www.practicewithpronouns.com)

- BelongTo – BeLoNG To Youth Services is the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) young people in Ireland.
- TENI – Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) seeks to improve conditions and advance the rights and equality of trans people and their families in Ireland.
- National LGBT+ Helpline: 1800 929 539
- A list of LGBT youth groups can be found at the link below [www.lgbt.ie/lgbt-youth-groups/](http://www.lgbt.ie/lgbt-youth-groups/)
- Dublin LGBTQ Pride Hub 44 Clarendon St, Dublin, D02 YK66
- Outhouse LGBT Centre and Cafe – Outhouse is a safe place for LGBTQ+ people to find connection, community support, culture and campaigns.

## TV Shows, Movies and Books

### TV Shows and Movies

- Heartstopper
- One Day At A Time
- Xo Kitty
- The Perks of Being A Wallflower
- Pride
- Modern Family
- Trapped: The Alex Cooper Story
- Grace and Frankie



Protip: If you have a Netflix account and you type into the search bar "5977" all of Netflix's LGBTQIA++ content will show up

### Books

- The Lesbian's Guide to Catholic School by Sonora Reyes
- They Both Die at the End" by Adam Silvera
- It's Not Like It's a Secret" by Misa Sugiura